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ABSTRACT

A pilot study measured the results of an attempt to locate inactive continuing education students and encourage them to enroll in one or more program-related courses. A sample of 20 randomly selected students who had been inactive for 3 years was involved. All had been undergraduate business students lacking a maximum of four courses to complete program requirements. During the 6 months following a mailing regarding completion of their programs and a subsequent phone call, five respondents registered in at least one program-related course at the institution. Several subjects who had moved from the geographical area had already earned transferable credit from other colleges or sought permission to do so. The study seemed to indicate the need for an ongoing process for recognizing and tracking inactive students. (YLB)

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The threat of declining enrollments--and what can be done to hedge against them--has prompted a vast number of techniques for wooing and retaining the continuing education student. A matrix of programs and services has been designed and implemented, many of them a testimony to creativity and some of them with real success. No school is immune, however, from that segment of students who have been wooed and won, but who subsequently become worrisome statistics by opting out of the system. Laymen call it dropping out, educators term it attrition, and critics sometimes equate it (often invalidly) with the quality control of educational services.

Whatever the perspective, the wayward student is a costly reality in terms of time, money, and energy. A significant portion of academe's respources expended on a first-time student are of the frontloader type--marketing and recruitment, evaluation, establishment of records, counseling, orientation, scheduling, and the like--are are incurred with the expectation that the individual will persist to a desired goal. However, as all of us know too well, even the best laid plans made by the adult student have a healthy probability of going awry; the personal resources required to pursue them--time, money, and energy--tend to be relatively scarce in the lives of nontraditional students during periods of conflicting

priorities.

Lives are not static, however, and a goal which has been set aside at one stage may well be expedient at another. Former students do sometimes of their own volition return to college--but what about those who do not? Could they successfully be encouraged by the college to return to classes? What might their reactions be to the rekindled interest in their educational progress? Would the logistics of trying to locate and contact these people be cost effective in terms of results? Was reattraction worth trying? We decided to find out.

To this end, a pilot study was designed to measure the results of an attempt to locate inactive students and encourage them to enroll in one or more program-related courses during the six months following the onset of our research. A brief description of the study follows:

Subjects: From a file of 227 former students who had been inactive (no enrollment in classes at our institution) for from one to four years, a sample of 23 subjects was randomly selected. All of the subjects had been undergraduate business students lacking a maximum of four courses to complete the requirements of their programs. The typical subject had been inactive for three years.

Procedure: A short letter and return postcard were mailed to each of the people at the most recent permanent address from the registrar's files. The letter stated that we would welcome talking with them about finishing their programs. The return postcard provided spaces for name, address, telephone number, and preferred time for us to telephone (choice of day or evening). When a positive

response was received from a subject, the academic record was again reviewed, and the telephone call made within three days. When a letter was returned to us for better address, we consulted the regional phone directory in an effort to locate the individual.

Results: The 20 former students who responded to our mailing represented 86.9% of the total sample and were unanimously positive in wanting to talk about completion of their programs. Our calls to these people were enthusiastically received, even among those few students who thought (wishfully, no doubt) that they had been certified for their degrees long ago. A number of the subjects expressed surprise that we would take the trouble to locate them and to call them at home in the evening, a necessity since nearly all of them held daytime jobs. Incidentally, we learned early not to share information with anyone but the student involved; family and roommates were sometimes very curious about why we were calling.

During the six months following our mailing, five of the respondents, or 21.7% of the total mailing, registered in at least one program-related course at our institution. In addition, several of the subjects who had moved out of our geographical area had either already earned transferrable credit from other colleges or sought permission to do so; hence, as a by-product of the study, we found inactive students who were certifiable for their degrees as soon as our college received official transcripts of work taken elsewhere (this is significant data for those institutions which are eligible for grants based on degrees awarded, e.g., the so-called Bundy Aid paid to many colleges in New York State).

Three of the subjects, or 13.0% of our mailing, failed to respond;

although we have no certainty that all of these people ultimately received our communication, we were aware of only one of them whom we were unable to locate.

Costs: Our dollar costs for the pilot study were approximately $225 for telephone charges, postage, and miscellaneous clerical functions, plus about 10 to 12 hours of administrative time for academic-record analysis and telephone contacts. The cost effectiveness of the exercise was clearly positive; the tuition paid by only one of our returnees more than covered our routine costs.

Implications: Although replication of our study would be welcome (and interesting, particularly if differing types of students, institutions, and programs were investigated), we think that the implications of our experience are in the development of an ongoing process for recognizing and tracking inactive students after they have failed to persist in their programs for a period of time. A systematic procedure, either manual- or computer-based, could be easily tailored to an individual college's needs and to the demographic characteristics of its clientele.

Whether the procedure were implemented each semester or were an annual task is probably relatively immaterial; what is significant is that the opportunity be provided on an ongoing basis to encourage former students to return to school. The effort can be fruitful for both student and institution, and may well be the sole encouragement offered to some students to return to an endeavor which can be inconvenient to a lifestyle already crammed with activities.

Certainly, we found it very rewarding to use a marketing technique which renders sound academic service, enhances the image of the

college, and attracts tuition dollars. For our college, reattraction continues to be a viable and practical alternative when retention fails. It is also a gratifying and productive experience, and one which we can recommend highly to our colleagues at other institutions.

Readings

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